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ABSTRACT

This study examined the reasons given by college students for choosing teaching as a career, comparing responses of high-achieving graduates of select liberal arts colleges enrolled in the Teaching and Curriculum program at Harvard Graduate School of Education to become secondary level teachers, and 53 prospective early childhood, elementary, and secondary school teachers at Urban College, a small public college in the Northeast with a more racially and socially diverse student body. Respondents rated 23 statements, giving their importance as motivations for becoming a teacher, and ranked their two or three most important reasons for career choice. Urban College and Harvard students were found to be more similar than different. Three of four motivations named as a primary reason for wanting to be a teacher were the same--wanting the opportunity to be creative, enjoying work with young people, and desiring a socially useful job. Compared to Harvard students, Urban College students gave higher ratings for the importance of salary and job security, while Harvard students gave higher ratings to independence and autonomy, desire to change society, desire to meet people of different social backgrounds, the suitability of the academic calendar, and the length of the school year. (JDD)

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CHOOSING TEACHING AS A CAREER:

COMPARING MOTIVATIONS OF HARVARD AND URBAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Little attempt has been made to correlate the motivations which teacher candidates identify for choosing a teaching career with policies to recruit, select, and educate prospective public school teachers. Yet, the motivations prospective teachers have for choosing their new careers can greatly affect their attitudes about their preparation, their decisions about where they will choose to teach, as well as their adaptation to their first teaching assignment. As research conducted by the National Center Research on Teacher Learning has demonstrated, the entering beliefs and conceptions of prospective teachers greatly shape how and what they will learn in the programs which prepare them (Kennedy, 1991). With an understanding of why prospective teachers are attracted to the occupation, those responsible for preservice teacher education and induction programs can adjust their programs' content and character accordingly. For example, students who have decided to become teachers because they want a career which will provide them with autonomy and the opportunity to be creative may well leave teaching shortly after they begin their careers -- or even before they start -- if they have not been prepared to deal with the curricular rigidity that characterizes many schools, especially those in urban systems.

Another serious blindspot in much contemporary research about improving teacher preparation has been neglect of the ways in which class, race, and gender influence the expectations and beliefs of prospective teachers, and the ways these differing beliefs should, in turn, shape the kind of preparation teachers

receive. While much of the concern about improving the quality of teacher candidates has focused on recruiting the most academically talented liberal arts graduates to teaching, few writers have questioned how this pool of prospective teachers actually differs from teacher candidates who come from working class families and live in urban communities, the group which Sedlak and Schlossman (1986) conclude now comprise the bulk of the teaching force (Weiner, 1993).

An earlier study by one of the authors explored the reasons students enrolled in the Teaching and Curriculum (TAC) program at Harvard Graduate School of Education gave for choosing teaching as a career (Weiner, 1989). Harvard's program aimed to train high-achieving graduates of select liberal arts colleges to become secondary teachers. Its population represents the "high status females" who were drawn to teaching in disproportionate numbers until recently because other career options were not as accessible to women or they were attracted to teaching as a "missionary venture" (Sedlak and Schlossman, 1986, p.34). This study compares the Harvard students' motivations to those of a different population, prospective early childhood, elementary, and secondary school teachers at Urban College, a small public college in the Northeast.

Urban College is the only state college in its state whose mission is to serve an urban population, and many of its undergraduates are the first members of their families to attend college. Its student body is racially and socially diverse,

although teacher candidates are primarily female undergraduates, many of whom still live with their families. A significant number are adult learners. The teacher preparation program is not limited to the most academically talented students at Urban College, but it does limit entrance into the program to students who have at least a 2.5 grade point average in liberal arts subjects. A small number of students in the program have received baccalaureate degrees at other colleges and enroll in the Urban College program for the sole purpose of being certified to teach.

Study Design

The instrument for data collection was the same questionnaire employed in the Harvard study, to facilitate comparison of the two populations. Respondents were asked to rate 23 statements on a modified Likert scale of one to seven, giving their importance as motivations for becoming a teacher. After rating the statements, respondents were asked to name other motivations not listed and then to rank their two or three most important reasons for choosing teaching as a career. Respondents were also asked their age, gender, race, and the type and duration of any previous teaching experience, as well as the type and location of high school they attended as students. All questionnaires were completed anonymously.

Harvard students were sampled in the first term of a two-semester program while they were enrolled in a general methods

course and a field experience. Fiftythree participated in the study. Students at Urban College could not be sampled at an identical point in their training for several reasons. First, Urban College requires students to observe classes as part of their introductory course. Second, most students at Urban College do not complete their preparation to teach in two semesters, and they do not necessarily enroll in their second field experience, the one which is equivalent to Harvard's first-term field experience, concurrently with the methods course. However, because all Urban College students taking methods courses either must be enrolled in the second field experience or must have completed it, at the juncture of the methods classes, the preparation of Urban College students parallels that of the Harvard students more than it does at any other cut-off point. Therefore, the questionnaire was administered in the methods courses taken by early childhood, elementary, and secondary teachers.

Based on a small pilot study of the motivations of students enrolled in their student teaching in Spring 1992, we hypothesized that Urban College students would be far more concerned than the Harvard population about teaching's characteristics as a job, specifically job security and salary, and significantly less motivated by the prospect of having a career that would allow them to be creative and to help improve society. On the other hand, we anticipated that Urban College students might rank their desire to improve schooling itself much

more highly than did their Harvard cohorts. Finally, we predicted that there would be some variation in the motivations students gave when their age and racial background were taken into account. In addition to comparing the responses of the Harvard and the Urban College students, our original design called for comparing the motivations given by elementary, early childhood, and secondary teachers within the Urban College program.

Results

Fiftythree questionnaires of Urban College students were collected. All respondents answered at least 21 of the 23 statements of motivation so all questionnaires could be used. Table 1 presents a profile of the Urban College respondents and the Harvard cohort. The overwhelming majority of Urban College students attended high school in urban areas, while the Harvard students attended suburban schools. Urban College students were more likely than Harvard students to attend parochial schools, rather than private, non-denominational schools. Urban College students tended to be either older or younger than their Harvard counterparts, and a significant proportion of Urban College students were Hispanic. Though both groups contained approximately the same proportion of married and single students, a greater proportion of Urban College enrollees have children.

The Urban College ratings for each statement of motivation are given in Table 2 and those of Harvard respondents in Table 3. For reporting purposes, ratings of 6 and 7 are combined as "very Important," and ratings of 1 and 2 are combined in "not

Important," as was done in the earlier study. Statements are listed in the descending order of importance given and are designated with the letter assigned to them in the questionnaire.

When ~~Urban College~~ Harvard students were asked to name their top two or three motivations for choosing teaching as a career, the motivations named most frequently as a first, second, or third factor were "the opportunity to be creative" (identified as the first, second, or third factor by 51.0%), "enjoy working with young people" (37.2%), "desire job which is socially useful" (37.2%), and "want to change society" (27.4%). Urban College students ranked "enjoy working with young people" (58.6%), "job I can do well" (33.9%), "desire job which is socially useful" (29.4%), and "opportunity to be creative" (26.25%) as their chief motivations for choosing teaching as a career. Table 7 displays the motivations which Harvard students named most frequently as one of their three reasons; table 6 shows the responses of Urban College students to the same question.

Three Urban College students reported a motivation not listed in the questionnaire, "wants career that fits family needs." No other self-reported motivation was given by Urban College students (table 4). Harvard students generated five motivations not listed on the study (table 5).

Discussion and Conclusions

In the motivations they name for choosing teaching as a career, Urban College and Harvard students are more similar than they are different. Overall, their rankings of motivations as

"important" are within 10 percentage points of each other for 13 of the 23 statements, and 3 of the 4 the motivations they name as being one of the first, second, or third reasons they want to teach are the same. Like their Harvard cohorts, prospective teachers at Urban College say they are choosing teaching as a career because they want the opportunity to be creative, they enjoy working with young people, and desire a job which is socially useful.

However, there are significant differences between these two cohorts in their ranking of motivations which were "very important." Urban College students view teaching's job characteristics in a different perspective. Our initial hypothesis, that Urban College students would rank the motivations which focused on teaching's characteristics as a job as more important than would the Harvard cohort, proved only partially correct. Five of the 10 statements for which Urban College students' ratings of "very important" differed by more than 10% from Harvard students' responses concern the length of the school day, the school year, and salary (O, J, C, P, B). The greatest disparity in rankings are in the importance of salary (B) and job security (P), with approximately a 26% gap. It is possible that under current economic conditions, Harvard students, who were sampled in October 1989, might respond differently to statements about job security (P) and salary (B). However, we argue that the changed economic climate notwithstanding, Urban College students would give higher ratings

for these two statements because many of them are the first members of their families to attend college and move out of blue collar occupations. For many Urban College students, a career in teaching is a foothold in the middle classes, as Sedlak and Schlossman (1986) note has been true historically for teachers from working class families born and raised in urban communities; salary and job security are two critical concerns for working class students who cannot rely on their families' incomes, connections, or social position for economic well-being.

We found Urban College students' lower ratings (as compared to the Harvard group) for "the academic calendar suits needs" (O) and "length of the school year" (J) to be a surprise, given the Urban College cohort's higher rating for the importance of salary and job security. The students Harvard prepares view the academic calendar and the length of the school year as more important motivations for choosing teaching as a career than do prospective teachers at Urban College. The decision of Harvard students to become teachers is not as influenced by their concerns about the relative merits of the length of the school day and year versus the salary they will receive. Twelve percent of the Harvard students rated "weighing salary against length of school day and year" (W) as "very important," compared to 20.7% of the Urban College group; but more significantly, 39.6% of the Urban College students rated (W) as a "not important" motivation, whereas 56% of the Harvard students found this to a "not important" consideration.

Like Harvard students preparing to teach, prospective teachers at Urban College rate the opportunity to be creative as one of their foremost motivations, but as a group they do not rank "independence and autonomy" (K) as highly as the Harvard cohort. A significantly more important motivation for Urban College students than for those at Harvard is the influence of a former teacher who served as a model (G).

"Want to change society" was the fourth most frequently named motivation by Harvard students (27.4%), but only 11.3% of Urban College students identified this as one of their top three reasons. Still, 90.5% of Urban College students ranked "desire job which is socially useful" (U) as a very important reason for becoming a teacher. They also rated "meet people of different social backgrounds" (M) significantly less important than did Harvard students but ranked "enjoy working with young people" (E) much more important.

Sedlak and Schlossman's contention that teaching traditionally attracted "high-status" females in part because it was a "missionary venture" still holds today. This interpretation is supported by the fact that 27.4% of the Harvard students rated their desire to change society as one of their primary motivations for becoming a teacher (table 6) and that 45.1% ranked their desire to meet people of different social backgrounds as a "very important" motivation. But if "high-status" teachers view teaching as a "missionary venture," (or as an expression of their dedication to social reform, which is the

formulation of their motivation we consider more accurate), it is also important to note that students at Urban College, who in their social origins are representative of the vast majority of public school teachers, view teaching as a "mission." Sixtyfour percent of the Urban College students rated their desire to change society (R) as a "very important" motivation for becoming teachers, as compared to the 70.6% who did so at Harvard.

We think that when viewed together these results indicate that Urban College students are no less idealistic than Harvard students but have an idealism that is less global, more confined to their pedagogical beliefs, more rooted in the satisfaction they feel in working with children and adolescents. Their world and their goals are in many ways more circumscribed but they are nonetheless attracted to teaching primarily because they believe they can make a contribution to society through their work with young people. This interpretation of the data is supported by analyzing the ratings of "not important" given by both cohorts. "Respect from friends and relatives (H) is rated "not important" by 51% of the Harvard students, but only 37.7% of the Urban College cohort rated it so. The vast majority of Urban College undergraduates commute, living at home until graduation and beyond. Thus the "influence of a parent or relative" (I) is rated as "not important" by 47.2% of Urban College students, as opposed to 64.7% of Harvard students. Only 1.9% of Urban College students responded that "enjoy working with young people" (E) was not an important motivation for them in becoming a teacher, whereas

11.8% of the Harvard group ranked it an unimportant reason for them. Further, only 15.1% of the Urban College students rated "job security "not important," whereas 49% of the Harvard students did so.

Currently we are examining correlations betweeen biographical data on Urban College students and the importance assigned to motivations, as well as correlations between Urban College students' specialization in elementary, early childhood, and secondary programs and importance given to the motivations (table 3). Our preliminary analysis suggests that correlations will be more frequent and stronger betweeen biographical data and motivations than it will be for grade-level specializations and motivations. We plan to report our findings as they are completed.

Though Harvard and Urban College students who are preparing to become teachers are more similar than they are different in their motivations for choosing their career, the disparities are significant and deserve to be taken into account, in the programs which prepare "high-status" students and those from teaching's traditional base among working class and lower-middle class females.

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Category	Percent Harvard	Percent Urban
Age		
20-24	47	
25-29	34	
Over 29	19	
Gender		
Male	24	19
Female	76	81
Race		
White	96	69
Hispanic	0	21
Black	4	6
No response	0	4
Years of Prior Experience		
0	45	53
1	25	25
More than 1	20	22
Type of Prior Teaching Experience		
Public School	10	21
Private	27	13
Parochial	4	6
University	2	0
Both private and public	11	2
Parochial and public	0	4
Parochial, public, and private	0	2
Education Completed		
BA, BS	76	15
MA, MPH, MS, MEd	18	2
Beyond	4	0
High School level	0	83
Major in College		
Humanities	53	36
Social Sciences	31	43
Science and Engineering	14	13
No response	0	8
Marital Status		
Married	14	17
Single	84	83
Have Children		
Yes	6	21
No	92	79
Type of High School Attended		
Public	67	68
Private	29	9
Parochial	2	23
Location of High School Attended		
Urban	16	64
Suburban	69	30
Rural	8	4
Other	4	2

Table I. Biographical Data, Harvard and Urban Studies

Statement		Very Important	Not Important
E.	Enjoy working w/young people	92.5	0.0
U.	Desire job which is socially useful	90.6	0.0
T.	Job I can do well	90.6	0.0
S.	Enjoyed previous work w/young people	86.8	1.9
L.	Opportunity to be creative	84.9	0.0
A.	Country needs better educated people	67.9	0.0
R.	Want to change society	64.2	1.9
G.	Former teacher was a model	60.4	9.4
K.	Independence and autonomy	58.4	1.9
F.	Opportunity to use subject studied in college	52.8	5.6
N.	Interested in how/why people learn	47.2	9.4
P.	Job security	35.9	15.1
M.	Meet people of different social backgrounds	28.3	18.9
O.	Academic calendar suits needs	28.3	39.6
B.	Salary	28.3	24.5
J.	Length of the school year	24.5	24.5
C.	Length of school day	24.5	13.2
I.	Influence of parent/relative	22.6	47.2
W.	Weighing salary against length of school day and year	20.8	39.6
D.	Media attention to education	17.0	52.8
H.	Respect from friends, relatives	13.2	37.7
Q.	It is an interim job	7.6	73.6
V.	Other careers are not available now	5.6	62.3

Table #2: Importance Attached to Each Motivation, Urban College Students

	Statement	Very Important	Not Important
L.	Opportunity to be creative	94.2	2.0
U.	Desire job which is socially useful	88.3	2.0
T.	Job I can do well	86.3	2.0
E.	Enjoy working w/young people	78.5	3.9
K.	Independence and autonomy	74.5	3.9
S.	Enjoyed previous work w/young people	70.6	11.8
R.	Want to change society	70.6	2.0
A.	Country needs better educated people	70.0	2.0
N.	Interested in how/why people learn	45.1	17.7
F.	Opportunity to use subject studied in college	52.9	9.8
O.	Academic calendar suits needs	49.0	27.4
J.	Length of the school year	47.0	23.5
M.	Meet people of different social backgrounds	45.1	17.7
G.	Former teacher was a model	47.0	23.5
I.	Influence of parent/relative	17.7	64.7
C.	Length of school day	13.7	37.2
D.	Media attention to education	13.7	51.0
W.	Weighing salary against length of school day and year	12.0	56.0
H.	Respect from friends, relatives	11.8	51.0
P.	Job security	9.8	49.0
Q.	It is an interim job	5.9	82.3
V.	Other careers are not available now	4.0	72.6
B.	Salary	2.0	53.0

Table #3: Importance Attached to Each Motivation, Harvard Students

Reason	Frequency
1. No answer	40
2. Wants career that fits family needs	3

Table 4: Other Motivations Reported, Urban College Study

Reason	Frequency
1. Do not necessarily intend to teach	3
2. Own teachers were negative models; want to be a better model for others	3
3. Adolescents need help	5
4. Teaching is a way to grow intellectually or emotionally	5
5. Teaching is suitable for combining family w/career	2

Table 5: Other Motivations Reported, Harvard Study

Motivation	% of Respondents
E. Enjoy working w/young people	58.5
T. Job I can do well	34.0
U. Desire job which is socially useful	32.1
L. Opportunity to be creative	26.4

Table 6: Motivations Named Most Important Overall, Urban College Study

Motivation	% of Respondents
L. Oppotrunity to be creative	51.0
E. Enjoy working w/young people	37.2
U. Desire job which is socially useful	37.2
R. Want to change society	27.4

Table 7: Motivations Named Most Important Overall, Harvard Study